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RUEHUM/AMEMBASSY ULAANBAATAR PRIORITY 1817  
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SUBJECT: MND: DPRK MILITARY RHETORIC AND NATIONAL DEFENSE  
COMMISSION CHANGES ARE ABOUT SUCCESSION

Classified By: POL M/C Joseph Y. Yun. Reasons 1.4(b/d)

11. (C) SUMMARY: The DPRK's recent restaffing and expansion of the National Defense Commission (NDC) and its hostile military rhetoric over the last several months are related to the DPRK leadership's "top priority" need to stabilize the DPRK internally in preparation for succession, according to XXXXXXXXXXXX. A second priority was to achieve improved Relations with the United States, which the DPRK regards as its only potential security guarantor, ironically. END SUMMARY.

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Military Statements and the NDC  
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12. (C) In an April 23 meeting, XXXXXXXXXXXX told Poloff that the Korean People's Army's (KPA) spate of high-level announcements over the past several months (such as the March 8 KPA Supreme Command report, the first in 15 years, and the four KPA General Staff statements since January, not seen since 1999) should not be misinterpreted as the DPRK military asserting control over the country, because the military could act only in concert with the Worker's Party and the Cabinet. Instead the "generals appearing on TV" was a phenomenon directed at DPRK citizens with two goals: to show that the DPRK's hostile external situation meant citizens had to pull together, and as a "power display" to send a law-and-order message to counter the increasing economic disorder resulting from decades of economic "depression." There was dissatisfaction among some elite groups in the DPRK, who knew of economic reform in China and Vietnam and wondered why the DPRK had instead deteriorated. To tamp down this internal dissent, external tension was needed. The ROKG was not particularly worried about the specific threats to the South contained in the statements because they saw the statements as targeted at the domestic audience, and in any case knew the DPRK would try to achieve surprise if it were to resort to military action, rather than giving warning.

13. (C) The key factor in the background was 67-year-old Kim Jong-il's (KJI) waning health. After KJI's August 2008 stroke, the DPRK was a "different environment that needed stronger leadership." XXXXXXXXXXXX said that before the stroke, KJI was confident that he could rule for years, but afterward he suffered "physical and psychological trauma." KJI had become obsessed with creating political stability to allow an orderly succession, though XXXXXXXXXXXX did not claim to know who was next in line. Immediately after the April 5 missile launch the Supreme People's Assembly had declared the beginning of

KJI's third ruling period. But rather than celebrating the renewal of his mandate, KJI was concentrating on changes that would pave the way for succession.

¶4. (C) The most important of these was the enlargement (from 8 to 13 members) and strengthening of the KJI-chaired National Defense Commission (NDC). The NDC was first established in 1998 with a largely symbolic role, but had since taken on policy and coordination functions. Now it had the lead on succession, XXXXXXXXXXXXX believed. KJI brother-in-law Chang Song-taek's addition to the NDC was important for succession preparation, not only because he was married to KJI's only sibling and close confidante 63-year-old Kim Kyong-hui, but also because Chang was seen as having effectively protected and acted for KJI during KJI's fall 2008 recovery period.

¶5. (C) Another key change was the replacement of National Defense Commission Deputy Chairman Kim Yong-chun with Oh Kuk-ryul, a 78-year old Kim-family loyalist (in relative terms, since all senior officials are loyalists) who XXXXXXXXXXXXX thought was consolidating various ROK-surveillance and special operations institutions under his control at NDC. One of these was the Worker's Party's Operations Department, which Oh has headed since 1989. (XXXXXXXXXXXX also referred to an April 21 JoongAng Ilbo newspaper article claiming that "Office 35," charged with intel collection, and the "External Liaison Office," charged with training agents, had both been moved from the Operations Department to NDC/KPA control, saying that ROK intel sources did not think there was

evidence of such a move.) The Operations Department, which formulates actions against the South, was "passive" during the 1999-2007 Sunshine Policy period, but was now becoming more active again. In other words, Oh's job was to keep the South off balance and make sure that it did not disrupt the succession period. XXXXXXXXXXXXX said he believed that changes to the DPRK constitution, announced but not yet explained, would also focus on succession-related issues. He alluded to frequent DPRK propaganda aiming for the establishment of a "strong and prosperous" nation by 2012, saying that DPRK authorities believed they had already succeeded ideologically and militarily, so they were concentrating on the economic side, which is where the Kaesong Industrial Complex fit in.

¶6. (C) The DPRK's determination to maintain internal order meant that it could go so far as to engage in "limited armed conflict" with the ROK. At the same time, the DPRK was well aware that ROK forces were ready for any provocation and would respond with superior force. In addition, the DPRK knew that combined ROK-U.S. surveillance capabilities would prevent it from achieving surprise, so XXXXXXXXXXXXX was reassured that no direct military provocation was imminent.

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Relations with the U.S.  
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¶7. (C) Asked what the ROKG's policy options were, given the above situation, XXXXXXXXXXXXX answered indirectly, saying that the main question was U.S.-DPRK relations. Second only to maintaining internal stability to allow for succession was the DPRK's determination to improve relations with the U.S., because only the U.S. could solve both the DPRK's security and economic problems. XXXXXXXXXXXXX said this push for improved relations was ironic, given DPRK rhetoric attacking the U.S. as a menace, but was nevertheless high on DPRK authorities' agenda. XXXXXXXXXXXXX said the DPRK saw the 1999-2000 rapprochement with the Clinton Administration as the first, failed, chance for peace with the U.S.; that the Bush (43) Administration had turned to negotiations too late for substantial progress; and that the Obama Administration amounted to a "second chance." The DPRK craved a dialogue with the U.S., aiming for a "big deal," but first needed to raise tensions to create the need for dialogue.

¶8. (C) The scope for inter-Korean relations depended on what happened with U.S.-DPRK relations. XXXXXXXXXXXXX was convinced that

the DPRK would keep tension high towards the South, while seeking an opening with the U.S. Therefore, his recommendation to ROK policymakers was to stay on an even keel to keep the South-North situation from deteriorating further. The DPRK's April 21 proposal for dialogue about land-use and wages at the Kaesong Industrial Complex was potentially helpful in that regard, but had to be approached carefully, because the DPRK would try to seize the initiative and lock-in economic benefits without offering reciprocal steps. Like other ROKG officials, XXXXXXXXXXXX emphasized the need for continued close U.S.-ROK coordination on all issues related to North Korea.

¶9. (C) XXXXXXXXXXXX cautioned that China would seek to prevent U.S.-DPRK relations from improving too much, adding with a smile that had it not been for its attitude toward the U.S., China would have moved to prevent the October 2006 DPRK nuclear weapon test.

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Mt. Kumgang  
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¶10. (C) As an aside, XXXXXXXXXXXX commented on the July 2008 shooting death of a South Korean tourist at Mt. Kumgang. He said that KPA soldiers and sentries in the area, after frequent contact with South Korean tourists, had a tendency to be too relaxed, so KPA officers periodically conducted exercises to tighten discipline. The shooting had occurred during one of those exercise periods.  
STEPHENS